

*Zee Jaipur Literature Festival*  
*Youth Outreach Program*



***Facilitated by: The Yuva Ekta Foundation***  
***Qualitative Report and Assessment***

## **Acknowledgements**

The Yuva Ekta Foundation would sincerely like to thank Teamwork Arts Pvt. Ltd. and the Teamwork Fine Arts Society for giving us a platform to conduct the Youth Outreach Workshops at Zee Jaipur Literature Festival. Our relationship with Teamwork and the festival has grown manifold over the last 13 years and we acknowledge the role of Teamwork Arts. Pvt. Ltd. for their constant support and help.

The program this year would not have been possible without the generosity of Ms. Jayshree Perival. We have found a haven in the ground floor auditorium of Jayshree Perival High School where we've been conducting our workshops for the last five years. Ms. Ankita and her team make all the logistical arrangements at the workshop venue. Our NGO partners are accommodated at the Jayshree Perival International School. We receive tremendous support from the staff and hostel warden Ms. Anju, who make sure that our participant's stay is comfortable.

We would also like to acknowledge the schools and NGOs that participated in the program this year.

### **The participating schools were:**

- 1. Jayshree Perival High School**
- 2. Jayshree Perival International School**
- 3. Rukmani Birla Modern High School**
- 4. Maharani Gayatri Devi Public School**
- 5. Sadhu Vasvani Public School**
- 6. Seedling Public School**

### **The NGOs that participated were:**

- 1. Doosra Dashak, Bassi, Rajasthan (also our partners for the Community Performance)**
- 2. Jan Chetna Sansthan, Abu Road, Rajasthan**
- 3. Urmul Seemant Samity, Bikaner, Rajasthan**
- 4. Jagriti Foundation, Sanganer, Jaipur, Rajasthan**
- 5. The Barefoot Skateboarders Foundation, Janwaar, Madhya Pradesh**
- 6. The Kabir Foundation, Khajuraho, Madya Pradesh**

*All names in the following report have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.*



## “Everyone has a story” – Jo Salas, Co-Founder, Playback Theatre

Stories are our way to keep memories alive. They help us construct who we are and how we understand the world. We have stories from our childhood, our past, our present, and even as recent as our morning before work. We tell stories to each other because it is through stories that we communicate.

Aisha (name changed) from the rural hinterland of Janwaar, Madhya Pradesh has a story about her growth from a shy young girl to a confident group leader. Mahima (name changed) shares her story of exploring her sexuality in an urban city like Jaipur where she struggles to find a support system. But that’s not all. Our stories are layered.

A young participant working with us has multiple identities, each of which has a story to tell. S/he is a student, a teenager, a child, a friend, and an explorer, trying to find his/her way in everyday life. S/he is also a citizen of this country, caught in the politics of our times and figuring out his/her belief systems. With the 50 young adults that we worked with this year, we gathered stories in hundreds and thousands because each part has a story to tell.

### The Youth Outreach Program

The year 2020 marks the 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival and concurrently the 13<sup>th</sup> year of the Youth Outreach Program at the festival.



The Yuva Ekta Foundation (hereon The Foundation) has been working at the forefront of arts and governance, collectivizing young adults on issues of socio-political importance and using Expressive Arts for awareness and advocacy. The topics covered at the Outreach Program each year are well aligned with the larger intent of the Festival.

The idea is to enhance the scope of democratic participation among the youth, through art, culture, and literature. We have covered issues like '**Hands on Habitat: Environment and Sustainable Development**' (2008), '**Building Bridges: Social Justice and Equity**' (2011), '**Freedom of Expression**' (2014) and '**Naya Nazaria: Moving Towards Gender Justice**' (2015). We believe in encouraging young minds to delve deeper into themselves, undertake a journey of self-discovery and understand where their 'self' stands in relation to 'others'. Our focus on issues like '**Breakthrough: Harnessing Emotional Intelligence to Lead Change**' (2018) and '**Boundaries: Understanding and Redefining Safe Spaces**' (2019) are examples of that endeavour.

With the country and to a large extent the world around us entering a conundrum of political turmoil and increasing intolerance, we ask ourselves this question: are we at the risk of losing our stories? There's an attempt to whitewash history and local cultures into a singular version or national morality. Given this context, we felt the need to explore '**Kahaaniyon ki Rahasyamayi Duniya: The Mysterious World of Stories**'. We invited participants from rural and urban areas of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to come with stories of their own, stories they wanted to safeguard and narrate.



These stories were on three different levels. One was a tale of local mythology that they have grown up with; the second a story of social change around them, and third of a personal struggle of transformation. The only necessary condition was that these stories should have left an impact on you as an individual. We collected all these stories in a sea-green *pitara* (trunk), which kept running out of space as we went along.



*Our magical pitara on the left hand side of this photograph was set up with objects and colours to invite audiences to share their stories after our performances. This photo is from one such performance.*

What made this exercise further interesting was the length and breadth of stories we managed to garner. Among a total of 12 participating institutions for this year's Youth Outreach Program, 6 came from NGOs across Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, and 6 from the city of Jaipur itself. The participating diversity was half-urban, half-rural.

Adding more weight, most participants from rural areas were women (close to 90%), continuing the trend of our NGO partners sending more first generation women learners from rural areas (see *JLF Quantitative Report by The Yuva Ekta Foundation, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019*).

The process of uncovering stories started on January 15, 2020. Three members of the Foundation including Ms. Puneeta Roy, Ms. Bhanu Mehta and Mr. Rijul Kataria traveled to Jaipur a day prior to that. Till the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, we introduced participants to a foray of theatre, arts and creative writing tools to assist in the stories they had to tell. While many came with a set of their own, the workshop created a safe-space for our participants to reflect, connect, and learn from each other's stories.

The narratives had found a space to feed off each other and common threads emerged. The second part of this process was sharing our learning with the larger community, in and around Jaipur. The weeklong workshop process culminated in an interactive theatre performance that borrowed its name from the theme itself. Over the course of 6 days from January 22 to January 27, we performed 10 times across the city and beyond.

The performances were interspersed with storytelling sessions where we asked audiences to share their stories with us either verbally (by sharing openly) or adding to our never-ending *pitara* whenever they felt comfortable.

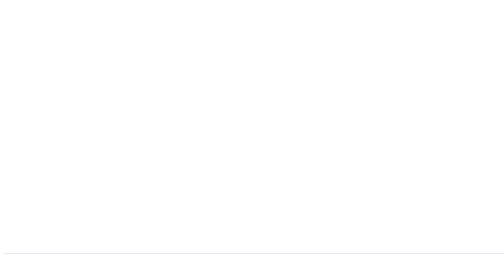


*At one of the school performances, audience members wrote long after the performance had finished. The pitara was left open for the next half an hour till the participants grabbed their refreshments. The writing had still not finished*





A shot of our performance at the Samvad stage on January 26, 2020



At Bassi Village on January 25, 2020



*Amongst the 10 times we did perform, 8 sessions were done for senior school students of Jaipur schools. On January 25, 2020, we went beyond the city limits in Bassi Village. Aided by our NGO Partners Doosra Dashak, we performed for and interacted with members of a government school in the area. Following this, our special Republic Day appearance came on the Samvad stage at the prestigious JLF grounds, as we reached out to close to 500 audience members visiting the festival.*

## Uncovering the layers

The first day of our workshop process is one filled with a bag of platitudes, ranging from anxiety and excitement to curiosity and reflection. Therefore, in order for stories to find their space, we first have to work with the teller! After an hour of ice-breaking exercises, we divided our participants into pairs of one rural-one urban participant. In an effort to encourage storytelling, we asked each of them to share mythological tales that they had grown up with. It was the first of many steps to get an insight into each other's lives. The participants were then asked to introduce not themselves, but each other, adding their own experiences upon listening to their partner's story!



*Warming up on the first day is all about opening up the body and mind to experiences that follow. One of the games we play is 'Deer-Wall-Gun'*

*We try and get our participants to be as active as they can be. Another way to do that is by working on reflexes, by making the activities fun and engaging*



*We see here that partners are trying to work together so share what they have learnt about each other in the little time that they had to interact with each other. It is here that they shared their mythological stories and about their first thoughts of being inside the workshop space*

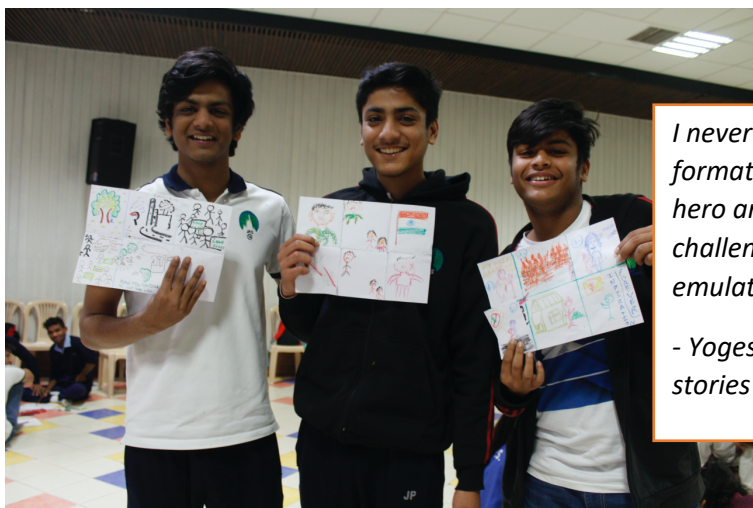


From that moment on, all of our exercises were aimed at finding an answer to the question: what is your story? For the fulfillment of this endeavor, we created a loose plan on how to open up our participants, allowing them to feel their vulnerabilities and challenges. Tools of theatre like voice work and physical theatre were intertwined with writing and drawing exercises, steeped in reflection and sharing.

Each day, our participants were asked to pen down what they felt about the day and what they left the workshop space with. There was also an effort at reimagining 'self' through activities like 6PSM where one could break down stories in 6 different parts. Flowing right into it was the 'mirror exercise', followed by a meditation session and partner led trust walk. Gradually, participants started feeling a sense of camaraderie and ease with each other. There was no hesitation in crying or laughing together and in fact, sharing one's vulnerabilities was encouraged. The unsaid feeling was that the group would take care of each and everyone and protect the stories that were meant only for this space.

*"Divya and I share a great rapport since Day 1 and when we came together for the mirror exercise, the bonding really showed off. The moment we gazed into each other's eyes and started the exercise, it felt as if we were looking at our own reflection. Not to forget, we giggled and laughed & had tons of fun!"*

*- Deeksha from Seedling Public School talks about her experience during the Mirror Exercise*



*I never thought I could represent stories in this format. I actually drew my role model as my hero and I could clearly understand the challenges she faced in life. I would like to emulate her work one day.*

*- Yogesh speaks to us about how he felt drawing stories through 6PSM*

## Gender, Sexuality and Re-Writing Stories

We feel a sense of pride when our NGO partners tell us that they like to send more women participants to our program because of the positive impact it has on them. As mentioned earlier, the participation of women from rural areas was at an all time high this year. The trend is on the upward even amongst urban schools. As we saw an increase in the level of trust and comfort, many young school-going girls shared with us experiences of harassment and the trauma that followed.

Stories about gender are left incomplete when we don't explore the full spectrum and intersection of gender and sexuality. It lends a whole new perspective to understanding segregation and exclusion of identities. One of our participant was able to portray this nuance by talking about alternate sexuality and her struggle of being questioned and ridiculed by others. From opening up to a few peers inside the workshop space, she was able to later interact with larger audiences by talking about the history of gender fluidity in India.



*In one of the scenes from our play, we showcase the rise of women through physical theatre and powerplay techniques. In this scene, a woman is empowering another woman to rise up against physical abuse and trauma and inverse the gender hierarchy. The process of scene development is part of the workshop space as we ask our participants to present personal experiences through theatre, every single day.*

Our performance carried this narrative throughout. Women from both, rural and urban areas are trying to break the traditional roles and barriers that have defined them from a patriarchal perspective. This is the time for women to write their own stories and break down the walls of entrapment. Be it in any role or form, we heard from our own participants (and later audiences) about the multiple barricades women have to overcome, both physically and metaphorically, in order to find respect and equality.

## Loneliness and the fear of loss

It almost feels that one of the natural outcomes of today's existence is a fear of loss and being alone. As we invited participants to go deeper into finding their own stories, we read and came across several instances where young adults expressed their anxiety and confusion. Most of it was expressed through write-ups as part of the workshop process.

*"Fear of losing people has been the greatest fear which feels impossible to overcome"*

*"I am shy as a person. I used to sit alone and think that nobody wants to tell me anything"*

*"I feel too much grief. Too many bad things are happening. It's hard to hold on"*

*"I left school because I lost my father. I couldn't bear with the loss"*

*"I was bullied because of my weight. I felt alone amongst my own friends"*

These sentences have been picked out from over 150 pages of participant responses. They also represent a larger sample, and responses to questions about self. Most of them spoke about having no support system to talk about their feelings and problems. Echoes of this sentiment continued to come up in our audience interaction during the performances as well.

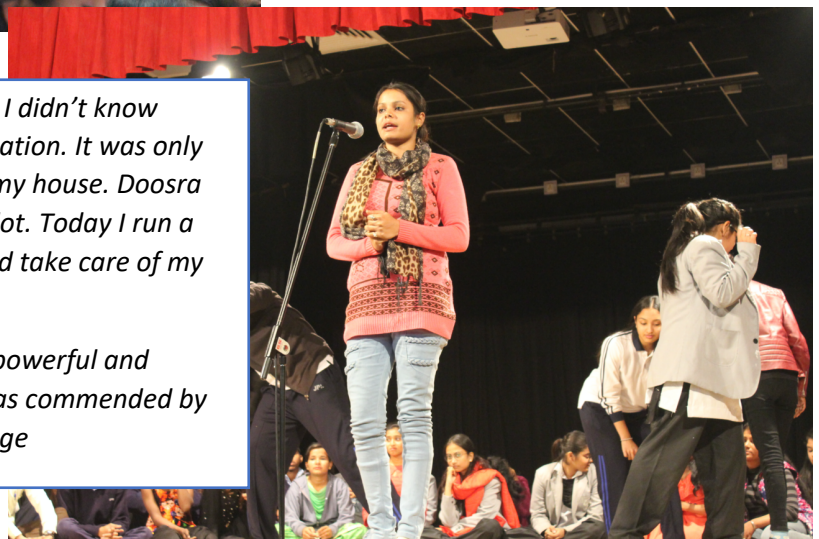


*I was bullied in school. I still am. I used to cry a lot earlier and used to be by myself. It is only recently that I've found confidence within me. It wasn't easy. I needed the support of my friends and family. I wish no-one has to go through this*

*- One member of the audience opened up to us after watching a scene on bullying in our performance*

*"I was 8 years old when I lost my father. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't complete my education. It was only later that I found courage to get out of my house. Doosra Dashak (our partner NGO) helped me a lot. Today I run a tiffin service, fund my own education and take care of my ageing mother and younger brother"*

*-Veena's story became one of the most powerful and inspiring monologues in the play. She was commended by the audience for her strength and courage*







*Having been through a plethora of trust and group-formation exercises however, encouraged our participants to openly talk about their own journey of partially overcoming such fears. A lot of school children from our workshops suggested co-creating safe spaces and support groups for students of their own institutions that felt that need to reach out. The need and almost reflexive response by Yuva Ekta participants came after their peers had spoken in the audiences.*

## **The Politics of our times**

If there is anything more polar than the South and North poles, it seems to be the current political scenario in our country. There is a constant conflict between ‘with me’ or ‘against me’ which translates into ‘pro-country’ and ‘anti-national’. It’s almost as if there is no scope for debate and nuance. At Yuva Ekta, our attempt is to create spaces where young adults can mutually learn and understand from each other’s perspectives.

An observation from this year that we cherish, is the elevated level of awareness amongst young participants about on-going issues in the country. Discussions about Internet shutdowns, the disputed *Ram Mandir* and biased media houses were prevalent and came from the participants themselves.

Contemporary political dialogues however, can hardly take place without going into real or imagined history. One of the most powerful portrayals of existing matters came when we placed mythological characters in current times, just to see what kind of snippets our participants can muster. While most of what came out did manage to make our audiences laugh, it also gave us a profound comprehension into how stories get transferred through generations. What’s also crucial (as was felt) is the need to redefine the archaic oral tales to suit the modern cultural setups.



*Stills from one of the scenes that placed Lord Ram and Mother Seeta in a modern context. It became a commentary on the institution of marriage, social media, spirituality and the much disputed Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India.*

## Sharing and co-creating stories

Our performance titled '***Kahaaniyon Ki Rahasyamayi Duniya***' was stitched together by the real life stories and experiences shared by our participants during the workshops. Each performance came with its own distinct flavor and each interaction came with its own render of emotions.

In the performance, there were two *Sutradhars* or narrators that tied all stories together by immersing the audience into a real-life interactive performance. Once the performance was done, the performers invited audience members to share their stories with us.

The exercise was one entrenched in creating a feeling of togetherness and community. We realize that when we listen to each other, we develop an empathetic instinct, allowing us to engage fruitfully with ourselves, and the world around us. It was also an effort to revive oral storytelling as an art-form and share our journeys of self-discovery with everyone.

*Are we weaving our own story at every moment?*

*How much time do we have in a day to process our own stories?*

*With our world around us in turmoil, are we even writing our own stories?*

*How do we co-author our stories with other members of our community?*

*How can we break barriers through stories?*

There are more questions than answers. What a dive into the world of stories has revealed however, is the therapeutic nature of storytelling. We also discovered the need to create trustworthy support systems for young adults where they can unabashedly express without fear of judgment or ridicule.



*I am overwhelmed, listening to the stories of my friends who have come from rural areas. I used to think that I have too much darkness in life. But to see my friends struggle everyday for basic necessities, makes me rethink life. For the last few days, I've just gone back home and hugged my parents. I've expressed gratitude for what they've given me"*

*- Mukesh said this on the fourth day of the workshops as part of a sharing exercise*

*"When I came here on the first day, I could barely talk to anyone. I didn't even know if I could make friends. I used to constantly think that everyone would make fun of me. But here I am today, sharing my story with confidence and taking back lots of friendships"*

*- Sunita shared her story with us on the last day of the workshops. It became the closing monologue of our performance*



*"I've been friends with Akhil for the last seven years. But the amount of things he's told me in the last three days of the workshops, I haven't known about him all my life. We came in as friends, but I can now say that we're closer to each other than ever before"*

*- Surya on his deepening friendship with his best friend Akhil*

These stories and many more are locked away in our cherished *pitara*. Although we came a long way, we still feel there are miles to go and stories to read. As a Foundation, we hope to continue our efforts in creating platforms that encourage self-expression and positive social change among young adults. If you want to be a part of this story, do get in touch with us and we'll find a way to co-author more stories!

**Regards**

**The Yuva Ekta Foundation Team**